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The Wheelers haven't stopped the music

BY GENEVIEVE POSTLETHWAIT gpostlethwait@paducahsun.com Jun 27, 2017 0

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"Anybody who enjoys the local music scene we have in Paducah now, they owe it all to The Wheelers," said Nathan Brown, Solid Rock'it Boosters bassist.

"If you go to Paducah Beer Werks or Dry Ground or Maiden Alley or JP's, and you hear the Savage Radley or Chris Black or Bawn in the Mash or the Solid Rock'it Boosters playing original music that people young and old, hippies, punks and hipsters alike enjoy, it's all thanks to Kenny Martin, Wheeler Underwood and Jay Grace."

Brown and Las Vegas native Danny X will be joining the original Wheelers -- Martin, Underwood and Grace -- on the Paducah Beer Werks stage Saturday night at 8, ending an eight-year hiatus to put on a weird, wonderful and Paducah proud rock show with openers Canes Bellum (metal) and the Hi Fi Ninja (punk).

"There are other great shows going on in Paducah Saturday night, amazing shows," Brown continued, "but somehow, fit this in. These guys have been instrumental in the original music scene here since the '70s, and their music is still relevant. It may have been written decades ago, but it sounds like it could have been written yesterday. It's just great music."

"They're not like anybody else," added Ronnie McCoy, guitar-shredding frontman of the Hi Fi Ninja. "You hear people say that about other bands, but these dudes really are unlike anything you've ever seen. I wish everybody in the U.S. could experience The Wheelers, but at the same time I'm glad Paducah gets to be the only place that's got these guys. They're legendary."

Starting the spark

Brown first saw Martin and Underwood play in their pre-Wheelers bands Signal Thirty and MC2 at the Jaycee Civic Center across from Hannan Plaza. He remembers standing there "slack-jawed, bright-eyed." It was the early '80s and he hadn't started playing music yet. To him, bands were groups like Cheap Trick, Def Leppard and Journey -- huge, famous things a kid from Paducah just couldn't touch.

But then he saw that show.

"When I heard MC2 and Signal Thirty, it changed everything for me," Brown said. "I thought, 'Well, I can do that.'"

These guys were incredible musicians, Brown said, but they were also approachable. They welcomed people to their practices, handed instruments to kids like Brown who had never played a lick of music, and encouraged them to make noise. The Wheelers made music about personal expression at a time when most local audiences only wanted cover songs.

McCoy first saw the Wheelers in '94. From the way they interacted with the crowd to the way they did their sound, McCoy was in awe. He was a 14-year-old punk fan, and though the Wheelers' sound wasn't quite punk, their attitude was about as punk as it gets. They did their own thing, they did it all themselves, and they didn't care what people thought, he said.

When McCoy finally worked up the courage to talk to The Wheelers after a show, their kindness almost took him by surprise.

"The first guy I went up to was Wheeler, and he makes you feel like you've known him your whole life the minute you meet him," McCoy said. "It's just impossible to be in a bad mood around that guy. And he can play anything that makes a sound."

McCoy said he's just as excited to hear The Wheelers and Canes Bellum Saturday as he is to play himself. He's really hoping Underwood will break out the nunchucks and samurai sword, just like the old days.

Never gets old

As excited as Brown, McCoy and their fellow Wheelers fans are for Saturday, the Wheelers' excitement just might trump them all. Martin, Underwood and Grace may have stopped playing shows, but they never stopped the music.

They met Danny X through mutual friends last year, and his addition to the band gave their music new life, they said. Brown's bass-playing skills solidified their sound. Together the five musicians have made The Wheelers' classic material new, though it never really did get old.

It doesn't feel like all that long ago that they were playing shows to empty halls or getting turned away by bar managers that only wanted cover tunes.

"People around here didn't know what to think about us at first," Martin said. "We had to win over the audience every time we played."

"If we reached three or four people, that was cool enough for us," Jay added.

By Thursday 100 people had RSVP'd to the event page on Facebook, and nearly 200 more saved it to their "interested" list.

They might be a few decades older and a few shades grayer than when they came together as The Wheelers in '79, but they're still just a group of friends looking to get on stage, make some noise and say something real.

t music, you never grow old."

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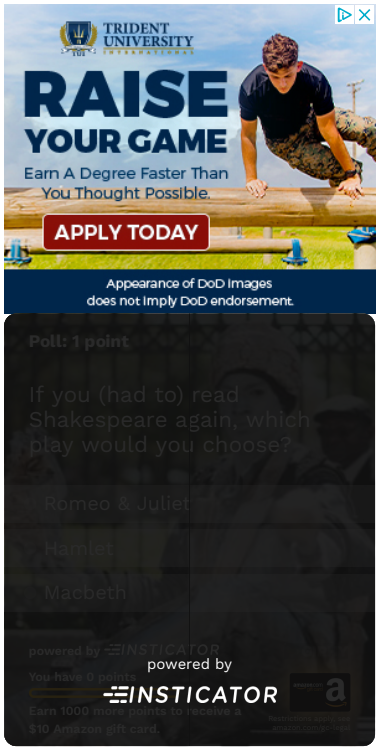

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